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How is the influence of the social climate in a university classroom perceived by the adult students?

by

Vinton Rose Spencer

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Education**

in

Educational Administration

Department of Educational Policy Studies

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall, 1995

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of Canada

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V Rose

Vinton Rose Spencer

August 21, 1995

16 Seaview Avenue
Kingston 10
Jamaica W.I.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the glory of God, without whom I can achieve nothing, and to my daughter Astrid Saskia who has enriched and expanded my life. This thesis is also dedicated to my sister and brother-in-law Claudette and Joseph Blair for their constant support.

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance a thesis entitled HOW IS THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOCIAL CLIMATE IN A UNIVERSITY CLASSROOM PERCEIVED BY THE ADULT STUDENTS? submitted by Vinton Rose Spencer in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION.

Sue M. Scott

Dr. Sue Scott

Dr. Michael Andrews

Dr. C. R. Yewchuk

Date: July 11, 1995

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the social relations and behavior in a university classroom setting and to find out how the adult students perceive these social factors to affect and/or influence their learning. This study aligns with the naturalistic/quantitative research paradigm and specifically with the ethnographic research methodology. Field observation and in-depth interviews were the main instruments of data collection. The study looked at a class in the of Adult and Higher Education Program and students' perceptions were used to determine (a) the factors which contribute to university classroom social climate and (b) how important the classroom social environment is to university students.

Three themes emerged from the data: (a) the impact of the social climate on students, (b) the influence of the instructor and (c) the culture of student-student interaction. The findings have implications for the instructors of adult students. Instructors need to recognize those instances when the academic, the social and the personal naturally intertwine and promote student-student interaction; they need to be aware of the social character of the university classroom and to make it a comfortable venue for adults to share

experiences. Finally, instructors need to assist the adult students to grow as self-directed learners.

The study provides the students' perspectives of classroom social dynamics, as well as social structure and processes and how these impact on their learning. It helps adult educators to understand the social context of university classrooms and the importance of climate-setting as a means of enhancing the learning environment.

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CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 presents the background to this study on the social climate in the university classroom and looks at the significance of the study for education. I also state my working assumptions and give some personal background that may assist the reader in understanding my perspective as I examine and analyze the data.

Introduction

Today it is almost taken for granted that adulthood is a time of growth and learning. Yet, less than a century ago, adulthood was considered to be a period of relative stability, or worse yet, a period of gradually declining physical and mental capabilities, culminated by disengagement from social roles and relationships. In contrast, recent research on physical and intellectual functioning has indicated that, with appropriate health care and stimulation, adults can retain or increase their capacity for learning throughout a life that has dramatically increased in longevity (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982).

Adults engage in educational activities for a variety of reasons, from individual self-improvement to increasing organizational effectiveness to social change. As a result,

adult education is typically defined by the learners rather than by a particular subject matter, educational practice, or setting (Haynes, 1990).

The adult student in an adult-oriented learning environment can be particularly sensitive and creative because he or she brings to this experience a lifetime of other experiences and is simultaneously exposed to other adults whose social realities are shaped by their particular experiences. This has led, in part, to a general acceptance that the educational social environment must be researched, and that it has a direct influence on adult learning.

According to Darkenwald and Gavin (1987):

> A basic assumption of social environment theory derived from early works by Lewin (1936) on field theory and Murray (1938) is that behavior is a joint product of individuals and their environments. Individuals and social environments reciprocally influence each other. Reciprocal influence is especially potent in micro or proximal social environments such as classrooms. (pp. 152-253)

Research into the classroom social environment is therefore necessary if educators and students are to understand it, benefit from it and improve it. This study is based on the following premises:

(1) The social climate does impact on the student in an adult classroom setting.

(2) The adult classroom is constantly evolving and therefore characteristics of the social climate are prone to change.

(3) The dynamic nature of the social climate in adult education dictates ongoing research.

There are also broad societal changes which are affecting the entire spectrum of education and which present challenges to educators and students alike. Economic prudence, for example, is increasingly becoming a factor in education and this is presenting a number of constraints on adult education. One possible way of minimizing the effects of constraints and of enhancing the adult classroom experience is to improve the social climate. Just how significant is the social climate in adult education?

Statement of the Research Problem

The purpose of this research is to investigate the social dynamics (relations and behavior) which operate in university classroom settings and to find out how adult students perceive these social factors to affect and/or influence their learning. To focus the direction of this study, a general research question was prepared. It was: How is the influence of the social cl1qimate in a university classroom perceived by the adult students?

Additional questions represent component parts of the overall objective of this study and include the following:

(1) What are the components of the university classroom social environment?

(2) Do adult students in a university classroom perceive that social factors affect their learning?

(3) How important do adult students in a university classroom consider the social environment to be?

Purpose of the Study

Qualitative research methods were used to identify and probe some of the overt as well as subtle social factors which encourage or deter adult students in a university classroom. An understanding of the social milieu by adult educators as well as students, from the students' perspective, could lead to a greater contribution by both parties, in improving the social climate in the university classroom.

This theory of the importance of social climate in adult learning is not all-embracing. Brookfield (1984) points out that there is serious disagreement concerning the uniqueness of the adult learning process and the empirical accuracy of the central concept of andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn (Knowles, 1980). According to Brookfield, many professional adult educators do not even allow theoretical or philosophical elements to enter into their consideration of practice. As Monette (1979) commented, "There seems to exist in adult education, a fear of unmasking the value choices underlying adult educational practice, as if once identified they might prove embarrassing

to this 'service oriented' profession" (p.87).

Happily, there are adult educators who believe in the uniqueness of the adult learning experience and espouse the value of research for its benefit. Flannery and Wislock (1991) say:

> Whether they recognize it or not, practitioners have a philosophy of education. And this philosophy influences how they 'do' adult education. If asked, practitioners can easily talk about their beliefs about the purpose of adult education and the roles of the learning process...While a working philosophy doesn't answer every dilemma educators face in their daily practice, a philosophy can help in understanding the basis for decision making. (p.7)

A knowledge and understanding of social dynamics in the adult classroom contributes to professionalism and ideally is part of the foundation of the adult educator's working philosophy. Adult educators need to understand the rationale behind their practice and the effects their actions have on their adult students.

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) underscore the need for adult educators engaged in the daily tasks of planning, administration and teaching, to understand the underpinnings of their practice. They find that unfortunately, educators have very little time to reflect upon the meaning and direction of their activities, hence there is a need for research to provide a body of knowledge to assist adult educators in their professional reflections. Merriam (1982) says:

> Because adult education is not a science does not mean that research should be shunned. Whatever the nature of the field, there are good reasons for investigating and conceptualizing practice. 'The systematic accumulation of knowledge is essential for progress in any profession' (Cross, 1981, p. 110). It stimulates thinking about practice and brings understanding and insight to the field. (pp. 97-98)

In Edmonton, Alberta, as elsewhere in Canada, university students represent an important part of the social fabric. For some, vocational and skills training prepare them to make an immediate contribution to the economy while those who pursue advanced and liberal studies make an important contribution as leaders and stimulators of critical thinking. Recognizing that there is insufficient knowledge about the motivation and psyche of adult students, this study proffers the following theories as a background to the research:

(a) University students perceive the instructor as a source of social influence, one who initiates or supports some social processes that create desired changes in classroom social structure.

(b) University students perceive themselves as a source of social influence, who initiate or support some social processes that create desired changes in social structure.

(c) Learners' attitudes and behavior are shaped by their environment and therefore the university classroom social climate affects learning.

The implications of this study are as significant for university students as they are for educators. The major purpose in investigating social relations and behavior in a

university classroom is to describe participants' behavior in the classroom and their understanding of it. This way, adult educators in the pursuit of a personal philosophy on adult education are provided with some evidence of the importance, or lack thereof, of social climate in university classrooms. Hopefully, they will draw parallels to their own practice. It is important that not only instructors, but students as well, understand how they both contribute to the social climate.

Significance of the Study

In undertaking this study, I found that to date there has been very little research done on the influence of the social climate on students in adult classrooms generally and specifically in Canadian university classrooms. It is not possible for all educators to undertake individual research on which to base their working philosophies or teaching strategies, yet they require this information to enhance what they are already doing and to improve practice.

This study is significant first, for its intrusion into the void that currently exists in the literature. Second, it provides a springboard for further research on the influence of the social climate on adult students in Canadian university classrooms. It is also significant for the information it provides adult educators on university students' perspectives on their social learning environments

and the instructors' influence on that environment. Here is information adult educators may use in concretizing their individual working philosophy as well as in formulating instructional strategies for successful learning.

Definition of Terms

I was always open to the possibility of different definitions by the interviewees or new dimensions to existing definitions. For the purposes of this study, the following definitions apply:

Climate: The relatively enduring quality of the total environment that (a) is experienced by the occupants, (b) influences their behavior and (c) can be described in terms of the values of a particular set of characteristics (or attributes) of the environment (Tagiuri, 1968, p. 25).

Classroom Social Climate/Social Environment: The atmosphere or character of the place of learning as a direct result of student-student relationships, teacher-student relationships and the interaction of students and teachers with the physical setting.

Adult Learning: All forms of learning (whether formal or informal) undertaken by persons 21 years or older.

Adult Education: Any organized educational activity engaged in by persons 21 years or older, whether on a part-time or full-time basis.

Social Structure: A set of social relationships among

individuals in a group (Flanders, 1966, p. 188).

Social Process: A series of acts or a pattern of action which, over a period of time, will change relationships among individuals in a group (Flanders, 1966, p. 188).

Throughout this study, the terms social climate, social environment, social atmosphere and social milieu all approximate the same meaning and are used interchangeably.

Limitations and Delimitation

(1) This study is delimited to a small group of adult student volunteers from the same university class.

(2) The focus is limited to the social aspect of the university classroom and deliberately excludes the psychological, physical, academic, institutional and other aspects of the adult classroom environment.

(3) The primary research is confined to student informants and therefore the credibility of the information is limited to their willingness to be as honest as possible and straightforward.

Researcher Orientations

This research project began as a fulfillment of a course requirement. How then, did the above-mentioned topic of social interaction in the adult classroom, get chosen, from an infinite number of possible topics? Obviously, this interest had been in my sub-conscious for some time, suggesting that I, however unknowingly, have some

preconceived ideas on the subject. Yet, when I chose this topic, I was convinced that I was neutral on the subject. Would I really want to know more, were I neutral on the subject?

Neutrality is a textbook idealism for researchers, yet its very meaning connotes a lack of that spirit that drives the researcher during those difficult and discouraging periods. In retrospect, I am happy that I was not neutral on the topic and that I was seeking out knowledge and understanding of a subject that has long interested me.

While this study has not been unduly influenced by my biases, it has not remained untouched by them. The very phrasing of the research question, 'How is the influence of the social climate perceived by adult students in a university classroom?,' suggests presuppositions on my part.

I have been a student for most of my adult life, working on my bachelor's degree, and then one post graduate diploma after another, in management, in communication and in marketing. Clearly, the social atmosphere in these classrooms have affected me and, to borrow from my research question, 'influenced' me in some way. The research question also suggests that the social climate in adult classrooms is different from the climate of classrooms during childhood. Again, this inference in the wording is an indication of researcher presupposition.

Patton (1992) says that "with clarity about purpose and primary audience, the researcher can go on to make specific

design, data gathering and analysis decisions to meet the priority purpose and address the intended audience" (p.150). My personal feeling about classroom social climate is that it is best understood by talking intimately with a small group rather than by doing a cursory survey of a large population and this is evidenced in my choice of a small sample for my study.

I also see classroom social climate as a subjective and not an objective phenomenon, hence my choice of in-depth interviews as the primary data gathering method. This is based on my feeling that the social aspect of the classroom is often not given conscious thought by either the instructor or the students and that it might require conscious effort to retrieve this memory and to convey the impressions and impact of classroom social experience.

In submitting a proposal to the university's Ethics Review Committee to do this research, I accorded the study the dual typology of basic (to contribute to fundamental knowledge and theory) and applied (to illuminate a societal concern) research (Patton 1992). The fact that I see this research as contributing knowledge that will help educators and students understand the social nature of the adult classroom so that both groups may effectively control and benefit from it, means that I already have a preconceived idea that the social climate is very influential and that it can be manipulated by the participants.

While the review of the relevant literature helped to

focus the study, it was read and interpreted from my particular world view. Since the literature review is a selection process and not everything that is related can be included, the selection of related material for inclusion presents an opportunity for the researcher's personal biases to be operationalized. Weight is selectively assigned, based primarily on the relevance of the material , but undoubtedly colored by my pre-conceived ideas on the subject.

In designing the interview guide, (see Appendix A) I tried to exercise the strongest possible restraint not to tailor the questions towards a preordained outcome to the research. I was aware that the guide could be a most dangerous tool if misused in the research process and for the first time I saw the interview guide as an extension of myself.

There are elements of subjectivity and objectivity in the interview guide as the questions are a result of the literature review and as a result of my personal experiences. From my reading I came to a knowledge of the Adult Classroom Social Environment (ACSE) as being composed of student-student interaction, teacher-student interaction, and the physical setting. Other impinging factors were the curriculum, instructional methodology, individual personalities and administrative guidelines.

I theorized that these would emerge as categories in my data analysis relating to students' perceptions of factors which influence social interaction in the classroom. I,

therefore, went on to categorize my question under similar headings in the interview guide.

My pilot interview was an unqualified success, dictating few revisions in the interview guide, and this gave me a queasy feeling. I began to question whether I was channeling the interview and forcing the material into areas where it would not naturally 'flow'. Although I was aware that the researcher has the right to choose which aspect of a subject matter to study, I began to question my preoccupation with students' perceptions and wondered if I should triangulate the answers with an instructor's perception. Finally, I decided that the instructor's perception should be the focus of a different study and that it was perfectly legitimate and valid to focus on the students' viewpoint since they are of paramount importance in a classroom setting.

Before undertaking this study, I would read reports of research without giving major consideration to the personal limitations of the researcher and/or affiliate institution. It is now abundantly clear that financial resources have a major influence on how research is designed, and particularly relating to the accessibility of sample, the number of researchers, the time-frame and the technology.

While the financial limitation has meant less mechanization, less assistance and less state-of-the-art technology, it has also meant a more intimate relationship with the participants and greater familiarity with the data, as a result of the number of processes I had to undertake

personally. This greatly benefited me in the data analysis process. While some readers might be biased against a low-budget research project, it should be pointed out that this did not affect the rigor of my research practice.

Finally, this discussion on researcher orientation would not be complete without mention of cultural compatibility and/or familiarity. Specifically in my case, I recognize that the issue of social interaction in the classroom might have arisen solely as a result of my being a foreign student. Immediately, this presents an issue of researcher bias. I further recognize that I am able to compare adult classroom socialization in different cultures and while this broadened perspective has helped me to approach this study as an inquirer seeking to understand, this knowledge could just as easily present scope for further bias.

The foregoing discussion is an attempt to assist readers in understanding the nuances which might have affected the study. For a reader comparing the study with a personal situation, the orientations of the reader are of paramount importance as they are likely to impact on his or her acceptance or rejection of the findings as plausible.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In this chapter I begin with a synopsis of the development of adult education. Next, there is an examination of the social climate in adult education classrooms generally and university classrooms specifically. Finally, I briefly look at some conceptual frameworks previously used to examine social climate in educative environments.

Historical Context

Adult education is a centuries old practice in some cultures of the world, while in others, its development is more recent. In Spain, for example, the Friends of the Country Societies, founded in 1763, first institutionalized adult education as a means of promoting the economy, as well as education (Flecha, 1990).

In old China, adult education was also introduced for practical purposes, with the establishment of a Chinese Education Society in Shanghai, in 1902. During this period, the old democratic revolutionaries set up general learning stations for adult remedial education as well as set up patriotic societies to disseminate revolutionary ideas and advocate equality between men and women (Maorong, 1988).

In the industrialized West, where literacy largely dictates social status, adult education is pursued for

recreational and cultural purposes, economic independence and for psychological liberty. Adult education is valued for the increased self-awareness and a heightened sense of personal potential which often come to an adult student interacting in an academic environment.

Today, adult education in North America is characterized by a diversity of educational programs and providers, educational purposes and philosophies. However, this has not always been so. In Canada, for example, the beginnings of adult education were small and inauspicious but the exigencies of wartime, immigration and an increasingly literate world demanded meaningful strides in the field.

The education of adults in Canada has changed dramatically over the last three decades. According to a Canadian Association for Adult Education (1964) white paper on the development of adult education in Canada, at that time it was a relatively small undertaking, concentrated in the extension activities of a number of universities and departments of agriculture; education for new citizens and night school programs, training and retraining, involving millions of Canadians.

Two decades later the picture had changed appreciably. Selman (1984) says:

> Canada has created many programs and institutions, such as the National Farm Radio Forum and Citizen's Forum, the extension work of St. Francis Xavier University, Frontier College, the Joint Planning Commission, the Banff School and the Women's Institute. Canada has also borrowed institutional forms from other sources, mostly from Britain's mechanics' institute, the YMCA, the

> Workers' Educational Association and newer forms of distance education and from the United States' correspondence education, forms of agricultural extension, school board and college programs and the newer form of university extension. (p.7)

According to Haynes (1990) the relatively recent establishment of adult education as an academic field of study (the first doctorate was awarded in adult education in 1935) as well as its ongoing practical orientation, have limited the amount of scholarly activity in the field. In Canada, at the beginning of the 1950s there was very little Canadian literature on adult education, however, research in the theory and practice of adult education is increasing in both quantity and quality.

Selman and Dampier (1991) say that today practitioners and students have a considerable and growing body of writings from Canadian sources on which to call, covering not only aspects of practice, but also Canadian perspectives, policies and achievements. Despite this increase in scholarly activity in the field of adult education, there is relatively little emphasis on the social nature of the university classroom.

Adult Learning

Today, there is a plethora of studies on adult learning, advancing one concept or another. One of the earlier and foremost 'thinkers' on adult education in North America, Eduard Lindeman, (1961) describes adult education as:

A cooperative venture in non-authoritarian, informal

> learning the chief purpose of which is to discover the meaning of experience; a quest of the mind which digs down to the roots of the preconceptions which formulate our conduct; a technique of learning for adults which makes education coterminous with life, and hence elevates living itself to the level of an experiment.(p.3)

Lindeman ascribes to adult learning the necessity of furthering the meaning of the experience, assisting in the critical evaluation of such experience, and attempting to understand the preconceptions underlying such conduct. According to Brookfield (1984) all of this finds a ready echo in the writings of current critical theorists of adult education, such as noted Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

Freire (1970), maintains that environment must generate an enabling atmosphere for the successful pursuance of critical consciousness. An important aspect is the personal philosophy and attitude of the instructor. Education, and particularly adult education, must not become what Freire describes as an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor of knowledge.

Lecture methods, otherwise identified by Freire as the "banking" concept of education extend the scope of action allowed to the students only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits. Generally, this transmission stifles creativity and interaction, thereby laying to waste the students' wealth of experience.

One of the best known advocates of climate setting is

Knowles (1980), who sees it as tantamount to helping people learn. Cranton (1992) says that Knowles, who was inspired by Lindeman, introduced the term "andragogy" into *American* educational literature in 1968. He specifically uses the term *educative environment* as analogous to climate setting, to describe those conditions that promote the growth and development of adults. These conditions include (a) respect for personality, (b) participation in decision making, (c) freedom of expression and availability of information; and (d) mutuality of responsibility in defining goals, planning and conducting activities and evaluating (Knowles, 1980, p. 67).

Brookfield is one of several writers referred to as the "beyond andragogy" writers (Cranton 1992). He encourages practitioners to question andragogy instead of accepting it wholesale as a theory of adult education. Mezirow (1990, 1991) also goes beyond andragogy and posits the process of critical self-reflection as leading to a reformulation of the adult learner's meaning perspective, which is that viewpoint or basic assumption that the adult student uses to interpret his or her experiences. Acting on this reformulation, according to Mezirow, represents one step further in the students' learning process and he labels this *transformative learning*.

Moos (1979) writing on the social climate of learning environments conceives a model of the classroom as a dynamic social system. He includes not only teacher behavior and

teacher-student interaction, but also student-student interaction (p. 138). In developing a classroom environmental scale, he identifies which aspects of the psychological environments of classroom are salient to teachers and students.

These were (a) relationship variables including affective aspects of student-student and teacher-student relationships; (b) system maintenance and change variables involving aspects of rules and regulations of the classroom and teaching innovations and (c) personal growth and goal orientation, with variables relating to specific functions of the environment.

The Moos model was later adopted by Darkenwald and Gavin (1987) in using social environment theory to determine the relationship of adult dropout behavior to the social ecology of the classroom. They found that:

> The social environment of a classroom determines in large part the attitudes and behavior of individual students. A key assumption here is that student perceptions of the environment are more meaningful than so-called objective reality or observed behavior, in that perceptions usually govern their behavior. (p. 154)

Researchers later identified some characteristics of the adult classroom social environment. In a study of elective adult education, Ennis et al. (1989) found that:

> The establishment of mutual trust is also evident in the establishment of communication patterns within the social system. Administrator-teacher, teacher-learner, learner-learner rapport appeared critical to the development of an educational climate. Rapport created

> by open and fluid communication patterns appeared to be a facilitating factor in shared decision-making. (p. 85)

Another characteristic of the adult classroom environment is the age-peer status of students and instructors. This profoundly affects the levels of equality and reciprocity in social relations in these learning environments and presents a challenge to educators and students alike (Darkenwald, 1989).

Adult educator, Roger Hiemstra (1991), notes that it took him over two decades to journey from a preoccupation with the physical setting to a more holistic understanding of adult educational environment. In Hiemstra, (1989) he begins to see the learning environment as more than just a physical setting, and in Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) he progresses to the recognition that a classroom recognizes that an environment includes social, cultural and psychological elements as well as physical features (cited in Hiemstra, 1991 a, p. 6).

Hiemstra (1991 b) notes that the journey towards effective learning environments begins with educators making improvements in their understanding and practice (p. 10). This may require changes which are difficult for some educators to achieve, especially in the process of creating an effective socio-cultural climate for learning. According to Haynes (1990):

> A number of general themes evident in current literature that offer a useful framework for understanding adult

> learning include (a) adulthood as a time of change and development, (b) the impact of life experiences on adult learning and (c) the significance of the social context as a factor influencing learning. These factors contribute to the uniqueness of environmental climate in adult education and the impact that such climate has on learning. (p. 27)

Sisco (1991) in addressing the importance of climate setting as a means of enhancing the teaching and learning environment notes that successful instructors are aware of the wide range of anxieties that adults bring to the classroom and make an effort to deal with them early. He says :

> They (teachers) realize that the first session is crucial to the eventual success of that undertaking. By creating a climate in which each participant can feel comfortable, secure and able to learn, they have created the conditions for successful teaching and learning. (p. 42)

Sisco (1991) found that other adult education writers agree with this posture and support the idea of climate setting, although different terminology may be used.

A deterrent to the study of the social context of adult education is the very nature of the subject. Tagiuri (1968) found that while it is a simple matter in climate evaluation to calculate student-teacher ratios or to survey teachers to determine their years of experience, it is much more difficult to map social systems and belief structures which play a major role in student and teacher perceptions of climate. In these latter instances it is the nature of the

communication and interaction which determines the quality of the educational environment (pp. 76-77).

Social Milieu

The literature suggests that the adult classroom social environment is largely comprised of inputs from the students and instructor as well as from the institution's administration. The social milieu is the result of the existing set of social relationships among the students and between individual students and the instructor.

Mezirow (1991) in explaining his Transformation theory of adult learning suggests that the establishment of *ideal learning conditions* is the way to achieve the cardinal goal of adult education which is to help learners learn what they want to learn, and at the same time acquire more developmentally advanced meaning perspectives. According to Mezirow, these same conditions are fundamental to a philosophy of adult education because they are the ideal conditions for adult learning. They are essential components in the validating process of rational discourse through which we move towards meaning perspectives that are more developmentally advanced, that is, more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative of experience. Under these ideal conditions, participants in discourse,

- Have accurate and complete information
- Are free from coercion and self-deception

- Have the ability to be critically reflective
- Are open to alternative perspectives
- Have equality of opportunity to participate, and
- Will accept an informed, objective, and rational consensus as a legitimate test of validity (p.198).

Transformation theory implies a distinct blending of the academic and social milieux as it posits that "free, full adult participation in critical discourse and resulting action clearly requires freedom, democratic participation, equality, reciprocity and prior education through which one has learned to assess evidence effectively and make and understand relevant arguments." (p. 199) Finally, Mezirow makes the point that freedom, democracy, justice, equality and social cooperation represent essential conditions under which human beings can make sense of their experience.

Dialogue, the sharing of experience and formal debate are now accepted techniques in the instruction of adults and they typify the indistinguishable line between social and academic interaction.

Andragogy is another theory that has been described as an organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners. Again, the challenge is to create an enabling social environment for this learning to take place.

The following are some of the goals set forth by Mezirow (1991, p.42) as essential for a practitioner of andragogy. Again, these involve establishing a learning environment

through classroom relationship. They include,

- Progressively decrease the learner's dependency on the educator.
- Help the learner understand how to use learning resources, especially the experience of others, including the educator, and how to engage in reciprocal learning relationships.
- Help the learner organize what is to be learned in relationship to his/her current personal problems, concerns and levels of understanding.

(Mezirow, 1991, p. 199)

The social group dynamics operating within the adult classroom vary from group to group. Some contemporary adult educators (e.g. Mezirow, 1990, Cranton, 1992) place the learner and the educator within a layered framework, beginning with what they call a general framework, (possibly national) then a community social context followed by a learning environment and finally an inner frame featuring the learner/educator exchange.

In advancing the theory of transformative learning, Mezirow and Cranton discuss the learner and the educator as participants in the wider community social context. However, the emphasis of this study lies in the more intimate social context of the classroom and how the students perceive that smaller social milieu to affect them.

The Moos model (Moos 1979) constitutes a classroom

environmental scale which identifies which aspect of the psychological environment of classrooms are salient to teachers and students. From previous works he delineates three sets of variables, namely relationship variables, system maintenance and change variables and personal growth or goal orientation variables. Given this framework, he used several strategies to select initial dimensions for the classroom environmental scale Structured interviews of faculty and students sought data consistent with the conceptual dimensions.

A researcher who adopts one framework will be aware of one set of social structures and processes, while another researcher, with a different framework will be aware of another set (Flanders, 1966). It would be inappropriate to argue that one was "right" and the other "wrong."

In keeping with the exploratory nature of this study, the framework for conceptualizing and understanding the classroom social structure and processes was not predetermined, but was allowed to evolve according to the students' perceptions.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter begins with an explanation of my reasons for choosing to work within the qualitative paradigm, and this is followed by the philosophy underpinning the research methodology. Next, there is a description of my participant selection, data collection and analysis procedure. The chapter ends with the ethical considerations which guided the study.

Selection of a Methodology

The search for a research methodology began as soon as I had a general idea of the research question, How is the influence of the social climate in a university classroom perceived by the adult student?

The aim was to investigate the social dynamics which operate among adult students in university classrooms and to find out if these students perceive social factors to affect their learning and if so, in what ways. To determine these social dynamics I would have to observe a classroom in session and interview students to find out the ways in which the social dynamics affected their learning.

According to Guba and Lincoln (1981) two research paradigms have emerged as the most widely used: the scientific and/or quantitative and the naturalistic and/or qualitative. The former has been the traditional research orientation of the "hard" sciences and the life sciences and

has been widely adopted and emulated in the social behavioral sciences as well. The methods of this orientation were so commonly believed to be ***the only*** method that it has acquired a patina of orthodoxy. The naturalistic paradigm emerged to challenge that orthodoxy. Guba and Lincoln (1981) hold that:

> The naturalistic paradigm is the more useful for all social inquiry and certainly for responsive naturalistic evaluation. In any case, the choice between paradigms in any inquiry or evaluation ought to be made on the basis of the best fit between the assumptions and postures of a paradigm and the phenomenon being studied. (p.56)

Borg and Gall (1989) support this distinction between the two main research paradigms. They point out that both the qualitative and quantitative paradigms have philosophical foundations, characteristics and techniques which make them ideally suited for the exploration of some questions and inadequate for the investigation of others (p.380). Cohen and Manion (1980) also affirm that the research question dictates the paradigm: "in normative studies data are always data for some hypothesis or other...while the interpretative researcher searches out modes of explanation *from the data themselves*, be they descriptive, analytical or conceptual" (pp. 27-28).

In light of the foregoing, I considered the naturalistic paradigm as appropriate because (a) the study is primarily interested in finding out what is the individual participant's perception; (b) the research proper would necessitate close interaction between the researcher and the participants and (c) I anticipated that the end product of

this research would be mostly descriptive. I was guided in part in my considerations, by Miles and Huberman's (1984) definition of qualitative research as "well grounded in the data with rich descriptions and explanations of processes taking place in local contexts" (p. 15). I was further influenced by Borg and Gall's (1989) claim that in qualitative or naturalistic research, the investigator exerts no influence and conducts no manipulation of the behavior being studied and imposes no *a priori* measurement units on the outcome. Therefore, I made the decision to work within the naturalistic/qualitative inquiry perspectives and specifically, within an interpretive paradigm. This study is most closely aligned with the ethnographic mode of qualitative inquiry. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) say that,

> The purpose of educational ethnography is to provide rich, descriptive data about the contexts, activities and beliefs of participants in educational settings...studies that purport to be educational ethnography vary widely in focus, scope and methods of execution. Some are clearly recognizable as classically traditional ethnography. They are characterized by the investigation of a small, relatively homogeneous and geographically bound site (p.17).

The question also fits Goetz and LeCompte's (1984) description of educational ethnographers as researchers who examine the processes of teaching and learning; the intended and unintended consequences of observed interaction patterns; and the socio-cultural contexts within which nurturing, teaching and learning occur.

I considered phenomenology as a research paradigm but

the research question in this study is not significantly aligned with phenomenology as a philosophy. The question does not seek to discover the essence of the personal experience of classroom social interaction, but rather, its influence as perceived by those upon whom it impacts.

It does appear, however, that the fundamental premises of phenomenology, "intentionality, (individuals act upon their world with freedom and choice) and co-constitutionality, (the objective cannot exist without the subjective)," (Bibby, et al., 1991) are applicable to this study. There is, however, a phenomenological angle to the study in that each student will interpret an aspect of past classroom experience and it is the meaning that each student derives from the experience which will constitute his/her reality. This reality will form the springboard from which the influence will be assessed.

In considering grounded theory as a methodology, it became clear that the research question aligns with this method only to the extent that all credible and believable studies remain faithful to the data. A significant distinction of the grounded theory methodology is that it entails Glaser and Strauss' constant comparative method. Rennie and Phillips (1988) explain that the investigator develops a core category from the initial data collected and repeatedly develops other categories against the core category. Theorizing is limited until the categorizing operation gives rise to patterns in the data. The grounded

approach differs from a descriptive type of study, in that, the findings of the emerging analysis influences and/or determines which data are next collected. Initially, the researcher focuses on that area of the phenomenon which is central to the study and then further research is determined by the outcome of previous research.

This study, therefore, like grounded theory, incorporates fieldwork, that is, being out in the participants' world as a visitor, trying to learn and to know what it is like to be like them, (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992); is grounded in reality, yet lends itself to creativity; and pursues precision and rigor.

Unlike grounded theory studies, this research evolved from a literature review. Lincoln and Guba (1990) postulate that grounded theory as a qualitative research method, if followed assiduously, is particularly trustworthy because it is grounded in the data, unlike conventional inquiry, such as this study, where theory precedes data.

The research instrumentation, in-depth interviews, constitutes elements of the narrative methodology to the extent that the interviewees relive and relate 'slice of life' episodes as they experienced them (Connelly and Clandinin, 1994). The research question stops short of the narrative methodology's purpose of unearthing the rhythms and cycles of life as well as the metaphoric nature of life (Clandinin and Connelly, 1986).

While, in general, naturalistic studies cannot credibly

be assigned too wide an applicability, the credibility of this study is founded in (a) the fittingness of the data, that is, the degree to which readers will be able to draw parallels to their own experiences (Guba, 1981; Sandelowski, 1986) (b) its trustworthiness and rigor, (the techniques and tools which assist the researcher in demonstrating credibility of the research) and (c) the truth value of the data, that is, personal contact between the researcher and the participants and the participants' willingness to be open and honest.

Wolf and Tymitz (1977) describe why the naturalistic paradigm is suitable for a study such as this one:

> Naturalistic inquiry attempts to present "slice of life" episodes documented through natural language and representing as close as possible, how people feel, what they know and what their concerns, beliefs, perceptions and understandings are. (p. 6)

In submitting a proposal to do this research, I accorded this study the dual typology of basic (to contribute to fundamental knowledge and theory) and applied (to illuminate a societal concern) research (Patton, 1992, p. 150). Nevertheless, an ethnographic study such as this one, which is essentially looking at classroom culture, does not imply, in the reporting of the results, that all university classrooms are like this single case. Rather, this study is more interested in looking at a social process in one classroom and understanding its underpinnings. Through thick and rich descriptions, readers may find the processes

familiar and useful in understanding their own classroom situations.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) underscore this in saying that some researchers begin with the assumption that human behavior is not random or idiosyncratic, therefore, they do not concern themselves with whether or not their findings will be generalizable. They are more concerned with making a detailed and explicit description of sample and setting, in order that the reader may have the correct data from which to make a comparison with his or her own experiences.

The nature of the work is exploratory and consequently perception and interpretation of phenomena form the bedrock of the data. The research process was deliberately informal as the study was designed for continuous discovery and understanding of the issues, rather than a single, definitive outcome.

All adult students in Alberta interact in a social milieu and are therefore of interest to me as a researcher. However, the participants in this study do not represent a general population, or even a target population. This is because there are no pertinent characteristics and/or demographics which apply to all adult students. It is therefore not possible to name characteristics and/or demographic which would identify a given group of adult students and say that the group of participants in this study is representative of all persons in the given population who possess those characteristics. Rather, the study gives as

detailed as possible a description of the participants and the reader makes the association, in light of his or her own circumstances.

A review of the related literature suggests that the adult classroom climate is multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and constantly changing. This implies that the social aspect of the educational experience is best defined, described and interpreted individually. Studying individual experiences enables them to be documented, examined, compared and grouped, and generally used to paint a picture.

Participant Selection

The number of participants was primarily limited by the usefulness of new information provided by succeeding interviews. My initial decision was to keep the number of interviews to a minimum to enable as personal, as detailed and as in-depth an investigation as possible, rather than a cursory examination of a large sample. Research began with seven volunteers and concluded at the end of the sixth interview due to repetition of information.

A class in the Adult and Higher Education Diploma program was chosen in purpose sampling in the Fall, 1994. The students began the post-baccalaureate diploma program in the fall and this class was one of the courses they took in the first semester. Full-time students took three to four courses while those registered on a part-time basis took one

or two courses.

Profiles of Participants

Four of the six participants are instructors in adult and higher education, one a trainer in human resource development and the other a homemaker and self-employed craft maker. They were all volunteers for the study and coincidentally all female, and married. Four of the six participants have pre-teen children, one has teenagers and the sixth has plans to start a family soon. They were chosen on the basis of accessibility and willingness to participate and their credibility and reliability are founded in the fact that they willingly dedicated a substantial amount of time for the pure benefit of research. The following are not their real names.

Renee, 36 years old, is married with two daughters. This former secretary is now an instructor in adult education and plans to pursue the B. Ed. in Adult Education on completing the diploma. She is an immigrant and a practicing Catholic who attends church regularly. Renee has few relatives in Edmonton but makes up for that with many friends, although she describes herself as an introvert. She claims to get along well with everyone in spite of differences in age, education or world view and is sensitive and helpful to others.

Lois, a self-proclaimed introvert, is a 38-year-old mother of three daughters,(one born since the interview took place). She operates a small craft enterprise out of her home, in addition to doing volunteer community service. Lois obtained her Bachelor's degree many years ago and this was her final course towards completion of the diploma. She intends to pursue a career in adult education as instructor of English as a second language. Lois says that her views on life are largely a result of her upbringing and the countless discussions she has had with her husband over many years.

Shelly is married with two teenagers and a twenty-year-old. She obtained her bachelor's in Illinois, U.S.A and finds being back in university challenging and uplifting. In addition to having lived in the U.S.A , Shelly has also traveled to Mexico, the Far East, Australia, and Europe and says she gets along well with all types of people. This former high school teacher of English and Spanish, is currently pursuing a career in adult education, as instructor of English as a second language. At 46 years old and a practicing Christian, Shelly describes herself as gregarious and sociable, sings in her church choir and is a keen gardener.

Betty is married and at 27 years old plans to start a family soon. She is an immigrant with many friends, but few

relatives, in Edmonton. Betty, who has traveled a lot and lived in other countries, obtained her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Europe and so this diploma in Adult and Higher Education gave her the opportunity to experience the North American university setting. She has a no-nonsense personality and modestly describes herself as *fairly* sensitive, to others' feelings, despite being outspoken. "I would like to think that I am sensitive, and hope others think so," she says.

Kelley, at 44 years, has 2 jobs, two children and describes her life as being full, with very little time for anything else. Yet she finds time to do community volunteer work, water color painting and a fair amount of reading and walking. The diploma in Adult and Higher Education will benefit her greatly in her jobs as a trainer in human resource development and a consultant in aboriginal government. Kelley, who comes across as being self-assured and describes herself as easy to get along with, is assertive and outgoing.

Data Collection

Interviews

The in-depth interview was the primary data collection instrument because it is suitable as a research tool in studies which seek understanding and insight. This is supported by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) who state that "the

interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p. 135).

The tape-recorded interviews were carried out over 3-4 weeks in the month of January, 1995. An interview guide was developed to ensure that certain generic questions were asked. The guide was pilot-tested in December, 1994, using one member of the class to ensure that it was capable of eliciting the information required. The participant was selected solely on the basis of convenience as she was the earliest available volunteer. Based on the pilot, the interviewee suggested some changes and after consideration these changes were incorporated into the guide, along with a few changes of my own.

The interviews proper were conducted in a quiet room at the university, with the exception of one, which was held in a restaurant. The interview guide kept the interviews on track, although each participant's experiences and perceptions determined the selection of probes and interview emphasis.

Field Observation

Field observation constituted the secondary method of data collection. I paid two visits to the class from which the interviewees were drawn. The first visit took place a week prior to the mid-term and the second visit was on the

penultimate session of the semester. This enabled me to observe the degree of interaction at different periods during the 12-week semester.

The observations were written from memory because I took few notes in the classroom, for fear of observer effect. I was not introduced on my first visit, but on my second visit, when I addressed the class on my research, they were aware of my purpose in the room. At this session there were end-of-term group presentations which I observed.

I kept a personal journal relating specifically to the research project. In it I recorded my feelings, ideas and problems encountered at different times throughout the research project and how they were solved. I also recorded my biases and how I became aware of them. These notes assisted me in my reflection during the data analysis

Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen, (1992) maintain that the trend among some researchers in educational qualitative research to make the data analysis more formal continues, even though the more formal approach conflicts with some post modernists who advocate a more creative, open and experimental approach to writing analysis. The data (field notes, observation and interview transcripts) collected during this study dictated an analysis using both manifest and latent methods of content analysis. Manifest content are those elements which are

physically present and countable while latent content analysis extends to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physically presented data (Berg, 1989).

Some of the categories were pre-determined deductively from the literature review. This is in keeping with Bogdan and Biklen (1992), who say that researchers ought to be aware of their theoretical base and use it to help collect and analyze data. Theory helps data cohere and enables research to go beyond an aimless, unsystematic piling up of accounts (p.33). It was expected, however, that other categories and themes would emerge naturally and inductively.

Categories pre-selected as a result of the literature review were (a) Components of the University Classroom Social Environment (UCSE) (b) teacher-student interaction, (c) student-student interaction, (d) teacher behavior, (e) characteristics of the UCSE which promote/deter learning.

Validation of Data and Trustworthiness

Among qualitative researchers there exist varying opinions as to how 'scientific' and valid this research paradigm is. Most are agreed, however, that there are particular exigencies of rigor that need to be addressed in qualitative studies (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Sandelwoski, 1986).

There is a technical side to analysis that is analytically rigorous, mentally replicable, and explicitly

systematic. The qualitative researcher has an obligation to be methodical in reporting sufficient details of data collection *and* the processes of analysis to permit others to judge the quality of the resulting product (Patton, 1990). In pursuit of methodical reporting, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four elements of meeting the rigors of qualitative research credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability are used as a framework for presenting this research process proper.

Credibility.

The credibility of this study is founded in my clarity of purpose (Patton, 1990) as I undertook the research process. The first step in establishing a credible study was to ensure that the study was worthy of study and that it was an appropriate topic for the qualitative paradigm. The criteria for worthy were (a) that it would clarify a social issue, (b) it would be useful material that adult educators could incorporate into their practice, and (c) that similar issues had been researched before and that this study would fall somewhere on a continuum. This was accomplished primarily through a literature review on the topic.

Dependability

Goetz and LeCompte (1984) state that credibility mandates that canons of reliability and validity be addressed wherever ethnographic techniques are used. This study does not address reliability in the traditional sense of the extent to which a study can be replicated with similar results. Rather, qualitative research is concerned with *dependability*, that is, ensuring that, the analysis process is grounded in the data and that findings are in congruence with the data.

Transferability

While internal validity generally refers to the extent to which observations and measurements are authentic representation of some reality. This study pursues transferability, that is, given a valid description of the participants studied, the reader is able to make reliable empathic generalizations, to find common threads in his or her personal experiences, and determine that the outcomes are plausible.

The main criterion for achieving transferability is faithfulness in the description and interpretation of events. According to Guba (1981) and Sandelowski (1980), a detailed description allows one who has experienced the phenomenon to recognize it immediately.

Conformability

Conformability is concerned with obtaining verification of the interpretations of the data. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, I cross-checked the items within the categories with the category developed based on my observation of the class in progress.

I then went back to two of the interviewees for feedback on the tags, categories and themes. I felt comfortable with my findings when they synchronized with the participants' statements of their experiences and I found the findings plausible based on my own experiences as an adult student.

I provided an audit trail for a colleague to trace the data from the original transcripts to the end of the reduction process and to evaluate my data analysis techniques. He traced the data from the original meaning units through to the final themes which emerged. When he was satisfied that, by reviewing the data, he could reach the same conclusions and make similar interpretations, I was satisfied with the results.

Ethical Consideration

Ethics in research are the principles of right and wrong that a particular group of researchers accepts (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Therefore this research project was designed in accordance with the ethical guidelines governing

professional research in the field of education. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) further state that in qualitative research, regulations or exact design cannot reflect the relationship between the researcher and the informants. They say the participants "have a say in regulating the relationship and they continuously make decisions about their participation. In submitting a research proposal to human subjects committees, for example, only a 'bare bones' description of what will occur can generally be included" (p. 50).

In pursuit of informed consent by informants, prospective participants in this study were told in a face to face encounter, the nature of the study, the research question and exactly what their contribution would be. This information was repeated in a letter to all prospective participants so that they would have the information for prolonged consideration before making a decision to participate in the study. (See Appendix B.)

Volunteers were given the opportunity to opt out of the project at any time, for whatever reason. They were also offered the opportunity to remain anonymous to other readers of notes, transcripts, or research findings, with the exception of myself, the main researcher. To this end, I conducted, as well as transcribed all interviews verbatim and each informant was accorded a pseudonym when the data were being transcribed.

Care was taken to ensure that the study was not threatening or harmful to the informants in any way. They

were encouraged to voice any discomforts/concerns freely with me, because, while the researcher perceives no exploitation of participants in the research design, Cohen and Manion (1994) point out that,

> Researchers in education are required to strike a balance between the demands placed on them as professional scientists in pursuit of truth, and their subjects' rights and values. (p 347)

The anonymity of the instructor whose class was studied, could not be totally guaranteed, as the students who were interviewed obviously know the identity of the instructor, and other students who were present when I addressed the class, might make a connection if they happened to pick up the study. However, it is hoped that the following measures will, as far as possible, safeguard the identity of the instructor from all other readers of this paper:

(a) All references which could lead to an identification of the course were deleted from the transcripts.

(b) All references to the gender of the instructor were made neutral.

(c) Interviewees were asked, and agreed to maintain, total confidentiality regarding the lecturer's identity.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis is the process of identifying, coding and categorizing the primary patterns in the data (Patton, 1992). This chapter, accordingly, describes the process of systematically reducing the volume of data collected, from the identification of significant ideas to the selection of common themes across the interviews.

Developing the Categories

The coding of the raw data into categories represented the initial stage in the analysis, and this process began as early as the drafting of the interview guide. From the literature, it was possible to identify five categories which would likely emerge from the data and some interview questions were clustered under the following pre-determined categories:

(a) Student-Student Interaction

(b) Teacher-Student Interaction

(c) Factors Which Contribute to the University Classroom Social Climate

(d) Students' Perception of the Instructor

(e) Characteristics of the University Classroom Social Environment which Deter/Promote Learning

(See Appendix A.)

The analysis continued as an inductive process during the interviews, as I intuitively tried to make sense of the responses. After transcribing the tape-recorded interviews the transcripts were returned to the interviewees for verification and/or correction and dialogue.

Next, I read the transcripts repeatedly, despite having read them numerous times during the proof-reading stage. I then numbered the data line by line on one half of a page and on the right half of the page I developed two columns, one titled ***paraphrase*** and the other titled ***tag***.

The next step was to go through the text of the interviews chronologically, identifying meaning units. These units were sometimes single words which connoted a meaningful idea and in other cases they were phrases or chunks of copy. Paraphrasing the meaning units was essentially re-wording the unit of text as closely as possible, to ensure that I understood its meaning and this was recorded as a paraphrase. A tag was developed from the meaning unit and this was a word or phrase which connoted the meaning of the meaning unit and the paraphrase.

After going through the entire interview developing corresponding columns of paraphrases and tags, I then grouped a number of tags around a common concept to form a general category or cluster, for example, *student-student interaction*. A notation was made beside each item in the cluster identifying the line number where that item appeared in the original text, for easy reference.

Four of the five categories previously identified from the theoretical framework emerged from ***this*** data analysis. These categories are as follows: Students' perception of the instructor, Factors which influence student-student interaction, Components of the university classroom social environment and Teacher-student relationship. The fifth pre-determined category, Characteristics of the university classroom social climate which deter/promote learning, is closely aligned with two emergent categories, Influence of the classroom social climate, and Students' perception of the benefits of social interaction. A total of 12 categories were developed from the data. These are the categories which were common to all interviews and therefore represent the first stage of the findings of ***this*** study. The twelve categories which emerged from the data are outlined in Table 4.0

Emergent Categories

The categories listed in Table 4.0 were derived from the data. Even though some of the categories were similar to my theoretically derived categories, in order to satisfy myself of the correctness of a category, the interviewees had to have made significant comments relating to the topic. *Significance* was defined as three or more comments by each interviewee.If a word or phrase occurred in less than three interviews, but was delivered in very strong and emphatic language, then it went towards making up the category, but was included in the write-up as an individual finding. An

Table 4.0

Preliminary List of Categories

(1) Students' Perception of the Instructor

(2) Factors which influence Student-Student Interaction

(3). Collaboration among Classmates

(4). Levels of Familiarity

(5). Personality characteristic as related to the Aging Process

(6) Social Expectations

(7). Experience: Personal and Academic

(8). Components of the University Classroom Social Environment

(9) Differences Between Full-time and Part Time Students

(10) Influence of the Classroom Social Climate

(11) The Teacher-Student Relationship

(12) Students' Perception of the Benefits of Social Interaction

example of this is Lois and her comment about classroom interaction influencing her to the degree where her life goals have been changed.

It is important to bear in mind that the key words and phrases as listed here are out of context and may not always convey the meanings that I received, hearing and reading them in context. The key words and phrases listed in the categories below are derived from across all six interviews, or are outstanding individual comments and combined, justified the individual categories. While they are exact quotations from the participants, no quotation marks are used and the items are listed in random order.

Category 1: Students' Perception of the Instructor

Key Words and Phrases.

Gave opportunities to talk; encouraged participation; was open to discussion; didn't encourage participation from quieter students, compared to some professors who give marks for participation; professor ruined atmosphere on the first day by not specifying what was optional and what was compulsory, work, this left some us feeling pressured; very relaxed style; very encouraging; interested in what students had to say; talked of personal experiences; was flexible; listened to needs; encouraged socializing; was occupied with some students in classroom during the breaks and so was not able to socialize; wasn't rigid enough; wasn't structured

enough; tried to lighten people up; was very interested in students' input; open, receptive to ideas; allowed people to digress; exhibited a lot of enthusiasm about the course; open, friendly; allowed people to speak their minds; had a positive attitude; willing to listen, encouraged dialogue; some students did not like instructor's style; managed classed well, informal; encouraged mutual trust and respect; unstructured approach; got on well with almost everyone; open, honest; made the learner a positive part of the situation; interested in students' well-being; listened well; incorporated students' ideas; was not judgmental.

Synopsis of category 1.

The students perceived that the instructor was open, honest, encouraging, a good teacher, flexible, non-judgmental and interested in their input. The instructor was also interested in their welfare, receptive to ideas, encouraged dialogue, listened well and managed the classes well. Some students thought the instructor was not structured enough.

Category 2: Factors Which Influence Student-Student Interaction

Key Words and Phrases

Competition; jealousy; lack of encouragement from the teacher; method of teaching, i.e. opportunities for discussion, sharing ideas; comfort level that the teacher sets; volume and/or pressure of work load; course content; group activity; opportunities for classroom discussion, brainstorming; meeting on private time for group project; the individual personalities; individual comfort level and self esteem; size of the class and/or size of the institution; knowing each other from attending previous classes together; full-time or part-time status; individual need for interaction; compatibility of age; congruence of views/perspectives on life; time constraints; experience and self-confidence; marking system and the level of competitiveness it promotes; instructor's control of classroom discussion or flexibility; collaboration on the coursework; how the teacher facilitates social interaction; breaks in the class; enjoyment of the class; classroom collaboration; sharing of interests; level of tiredness; personal time available for interaction.

Synopsis of category 2.

There are many factors which influence the student-student relationship, some positively and others negatively. Chief among these influencing factor are the students' individual personalities and desire for social interaction; the professor's encouragement or lack thereof; the students' individual commitments and responsibilities and their ability to manage time.

Category 3: Collaboration Among Classmates

Key Words and Phrases

Teacher told us, just talk to each other, run your ideas by each other; the way the teacher organized a lot of group activity meant that you had to talk to other students a whole lot; had to meet outside of class hours for group projects; grades are important, but I want you all to do well, I want you all to get something out of it. I want you all to talk to members of your groups; it was more collaborative learning; what the instructor did also was to set up a group project, kick us out, tell us to go work on it and then walk from group to group; definitely collaborative and some students found this interaction both fulfilling and necessary; we had everybody's phone number so we could contact anybody we wanted; some profs. make the classroom

very competitive and when it becomes competitive, then the social interaction can just cease; the way the instructor organized us encouraged interaction because there was a lot to do in groups. It was a feeling of we're all in the same boat so let us all see what we can make of it together; more towards collaboration but the class was too big for it to be a really collaborative setting; we can get further by talking about what we feel and asking others how they feel; it was collaborative in general but competitive for me personally, not measuring up to anybody else, but using my own yardstick to measure my performance; for the projects, people with similar interests got together so I think people were more competitive with themselves, they weren't necessarily beating up on anybody else.

Synopsis of category 3.

Student-student collaboration was the key ingredient in the instructor's organization and management of the curriculum and this was achieved through classroom discussions, debates, and group work, both during class-time and on personal time.

Category 4: Levels of Familiarity

Key Words and Phrases

Depends on whether you are part-time or full-time; part-timers usually juggling career, family and school; feeling of

alienation in this big university; familiarity with physical setting leads to a feeling of confidence, self-confidence helps you to focus; familiarity with the university system meant realistic social expectations; giving information about self on first day lightens things up; familiarity leads to feeling of comfort; people who knew each other from previous classes just continued that relationship; instructor's presence takes care of unfamiliarity; lots of friendships formed; not going to be back so didn't get too friendly; wasn't one of my department courses so I didn't know a lot of people.; class was relatively welcoming; large class so it was difficult to get to know people; climate became friendly as people became more acquainted, supportive of each other; list of telephone numbers helped bridge unfamiliarity; big class; cliques.

Synopsis of category 4.

Levels of familiarity developed by the students range from mere acquaintances to close friends, depending on how well the individual student is able to get to know other students and the structure and system of the institution in general. This in turn depends on whether one is a full-time or a part-time student. Full-time students meet in successive courses and some ultimately develop friendships while part-time students seldom find the time to fraternize, usually juggling a career, family responsibilities and school.

Category 5: Personality Characteristics as Relating to the Aging Process

Key Words and Phrases

As an adult I've become used to trying new things, things I'm unsure of, like this course, but I feel like it's important to try; quiet students get overlooked; we don't put teachers on pedestals the way kids do, because we are adults and they have to treat us as such; felt pressured first day as volume of work was announced; pressure affects ability to interact; we are not that threatened by a teacher the way kids are and we question things kids don't; I'm an introvert, introverts do not necessarily need social interaction; as an adult student I question the teacher more because of my own experiences; I'm more comfortable with who I am now, so I interact better; I'm older now, so I'm really keen on what I'm doing and trying to get as much out of it as I can; I need social interaction, need to feel relaxed and comfortable because I find myself slower (academically) as an adult; I've found out that I can relate better to somebody my own age; integrating with young adults is a culture shock; extroverts need social interaction; introverts don't; just because I'm an adult I've experienced a bit more, so I'm more willing to interact than when I was younger; adults are past that point of pride where to know something makes you a somebody, experience brings humility.

Synopsis of category 5.

Diverse personality characteristics constitute a major component of the university classroom social atmosphere. Introverts say that they need social interaction less than the extroverts do, but that they benefit from it and it enhances the classroom experience. Adult students perceive that their age-peer status with the instructor commands more respect from the instructor and makes them more able to question issues. For some students, their life experiences have led to self-confidence and for others, to humility, which comes from knowing who they are.

Category 6: Social Expectations

Key Words and Phrases

Coming back to school after 10-12 years, I had some kind of social expectation initially, now working and studying, I don't have that expectation.; feel comfortable due to familiarity with the university; as a part-time student, no social expectations; would definitely have social expectations if I were a full-time student; had no social expectations when I registered, did not know of the value of its contribution to my academic success; didn't think about it at the start of my first program, now, having experienced it, I feel it is most important; had no social expectations, it's been a by-product I didn't bargain on when I signed up.

Synopsis of category 6.

Most adult students do not have social expectations initially, on registering in university, but come to expect social interaction after experiencing their first few courses. Students are startled at how much social interaction impacts on their activities, and increasingly come to value it as a contributing factor to their success.

Category 7: Experience: Personal & Academic

Key Words and Phrases

Most teachers respect our experience and background; you learn from others' experiences; experience leads to questioning the teacher; adults want to discuss personal experiences; culture shock due to age difference with some students; found it difficult to communicate with young adults due to their lack of experience; divergent views; experience promotes confidence, a big factor in social interaction; experience promotes humility; adult students bring life experiences to the classroom; experience promotes tolerance of differences; our age and levels of experience are factors for opportunities; interesting to hear other peoples' experiences, how they handled situations.

Synopsis of category 7.

Adult students like to discuss personal experiences and they learn from how others handled situations. Most

instructors respect the experience and background of their adult students and some students in turn are able to have confidence and ease in classroom interaction, based on their age and experience.

Category 8: Components of the Adult Classroom Social Climate

Key Words and Phrases

How the students interact with each other; classroom learning activities; how the syllabus is handled; course content; opportunities for communication; the teacher's influence; the professor; management of the curriculum; student-student interaction; the pace and tone set by the teacher; individual personalities; the physical environment; the students' feelings and fears; size of the class; physical comfort of the classroom.

Synopsis of category 8.

Factors which contribute to the adult classroom social climate are (a) the opportunities available for communication, (b) the teacher's influence, (c) the professor's organization and, management of the curriculum, (d) the individual personalities, (e) the interaction among students, and (f) the comfort of the physical environment.

Category 9: Differences Between Full-time and Part-time Students

Key Words and Phrases

Full-time students tend to be younger adults; two jobs, family responsibilities; full-timers more competitive; have children; tiredness; full-time students need more social interaction; part-timers take longer to complete program so they meet different students all the time. They do not tend to develop close relationships; no time for campus relations; part-time students tend not to join fraternities or get involved in campus activities; part-time students tend to be in a continuous program meet in consecutive classes and tend to develop friendships.

Synopsis of category 9.

Full-time students tend to need more social interaction than part-time students because they are generally younger, spend more time on campus, meet the same students in successive classes and are more involved in campus activities. They tend not to have the additional responsibilities of a career and raising a family as most part-time students do.

Category 10: Influence of Classroom Social Climate

Key Words and Phrases

Good social climate increases academic performance; important; helps student to feel relaxed, comfortable; expanded world view; Influenced me to change my goals in life; introverts not affected, only extroverts; full-timers are affected by it more than part-timers; affects self-esteem and performance; more important to some students than others; positive social environment leads to increased self-confidence which in turn leads to success; affects retention and recall; affects the exchanging of feelings, affects how comfortable or how alone people feel; affects the free and open exchange of ideas; not the most important aspect of a class; social interaction is beneficial; sets the stage for talking through problems; valuable; enhances academic performance but is not all-important.

Synopsis of category 10.

The classroom social atmosphere is perceived as generally very important because it encourages or discourages the free and open exchange of ideas, promotes or deters the talking through of problems, influences student's comfort level which in turn impacts on academic performance and it can affect the student's ability for retention and recall.

Some students perceive that the social atmosphere is more important to full-time students than it is to part-time students. Some students who describe themselves as introverts say that they are less affected by the social atmosphere than their extroverted counterparts are.

Category 11: The Teacher-Student Relationship

Key Words and Phrases

Definition of teacher-student relationship.

How the two interact; verbal and body language between teacher and student; lecture-style pedagogy discourages a relationship; Prof. chooses how the two will relate.

Good teacher-student relationship.

A lot of interaction; just a lot of talking; great interaction; great teacher; pretty good; open, friendly; very good interaction.

General influences on the relationship.

Comfort level that the Prof. sets; teaching style; encouragement from teacher; teacher sets the tone; whether teacher is an authority figure or is friendly; attitude of the Prof.; instructor's personality; relationship individually determined; the Prof.'s attitude, teaching style and his or her efforts at climate-setting

Characteristics of *this* instructor.

Encouraging; shared personal experiences with students; was open to discussion; encouraged socializing; open-style; relaxed style; encouraging, was excited about the course; wanted students to be relaxed; shared personal experiences; changed things last minute, this drove some people 'nuts'; opened up topics for discussions; flexible; set the tone for interaction on the first day; open and receptive to everyone's ideas; exhibited a lot of enthusiasm about the course and encouraged us to expect interesting learning; open; friendly; encouraged students to speak their minds; teacher had a positive attitude; managed classes well; encouraged trust and mutual respect; made the learner a part of the situation; listened well; interested in students' welfare.

Synopsis of category 11.

There was good teacher-student interaction in this class. Among those factors which promoted this relationship were the personal characteristics of the professor, teaching style and the feelings of ease and relaxation the students experienced in the class.

Category 12: Students' Perception of the Benefits of Social Interaction

Key Words and Phrases

Positive social interaction leads to increased learning; feeling relaxed and comfortable led to better academic performance; new ideas; broader perspective; exposure; apt to try harder; better performance; learned tolerance of differences; joy of socializing with academics; helps ability to retain and recall; opportunity to exchange feelings; ideas can be scrutinized; class wouldn't be as good without it, wouldn't jell as well; talking is the way adults handle problems; one doesn't have to experience something to understand it; learned about things outside of one's personal experience.

Synopsis of category 12.

Students perceive that social interaction helps them to feel relaxed and comfortable, resulting in better academic performance. They perceive other benefits to be greater exposure through others' experiences, a broader perspective, an acquired tolerance for differences and the opportunity to exchange feelings and have their own ideas scrutinized.

From Categories to Synopses

As the reader notices, I developed the twelve categories from key words and phrases and then described the essence of each category in a synopsis. Throughout the stages of identifying meaning units, paraphrases, and tags, there was a feeling of simply measuring and combining ingredients, and there was that anxiety for the moment when the ingredients would begin to blend into a smooth mixture. That moment of the data beginning to take shape and to cohere, came during the development of the categories.

Once I had gone through the texts a few times, grouping tags into the pre-determined categories, titles for additional categories automatically suggested themselves, due to the number of times I encountered the same thoughts in all the interviews. I ceased to develop new categories at the point when suggestions for new titles of categories began to get repetitive and the same tags began to appear over and over in new categories. Having completed the categories, I was then able to study them in more detail and to make interpretations.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985):

> The process of data analysis, then, is essentially a synthetic one in which the constructions that have emerged (been shaped by) inquirer-source interactions are reconstructed into meaningful wholes. Data analysis is thus not a matter of data reduction, as is frequently claimed, but of induction. (p. 333)

I then went through each category color coding items around a common theme. I decided on a major theme for each cluster and additional sub-themes where applicable. The identification of the themes and the decision of level of significance were a combination of deduction and induction.

I developed a theme inductively and substantiated this decision deductively through saturation level in the categories and in the original texts.

I was further convinced of the accuracy of my deductions, when I realized how the perceptions and feelings of the various respondents cohered to form a total picture. The following dissection of Category 6, for example, shows the congruence of the data irrespective of source. The items listed in Table 4.1 constitute Synopsis 6 and the corresponding sources are shown:

Table 4.1

Dissection of Synopsis 6 on Social Expectations

Item	Source
Coming back to school after 10-12 years, I had some social expectations. Now, working and studying I no longer have that kind of expectation.	RENEE
Yes, I had social expectations to a certain level and no more. Having attended this university when I was doing my first degree, I felt comfortable and confident.	LOIS
As a part-time student I was not really interested in developing friendships because I knew that I wouldn't be back the next semester. But if I were a full-time student, yes, I would definitely need that social interaction.	MAE
I didn't think about it at the start of my first program, but now, yes, I definitely do, having experienced it in the classes I have attended. I find that the social interaction is very important.	BETTY
I had no social expectation when I first attended. It has been a by-product I didn't bargain on when I was signing up.	KELLEY

Synopsis of category 6.

Most students do not have social expectations initially, on registering in university, but come to expect social

interaction after experiencing their first few courses. Students are startled at how much social interaction impacts on their activities, and increasingly come to value it as a contributing factor to their success.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) hold that it is not only semantic symbols that are relevant to the research process but also the opportunity for the inquirer to use insight, intuition and imagination to draw conclusions. Therefore it felt right to sit and pour over the material, comparing, contrasting and in general speculating on the shape the data took, as I clustered the items and then developed a synopsis of each category.

From Synopses to Themes

I perceived a level of connection and interdependence among the concepts which emerged in the twelve synopses. At this point I realized that the ingredients had indeed blended because the synopses were in effect validating each other in their repetitiveness, their extension of each other and finally in the way they all cohered to present a bigger picture of classroom social environment. I could even get a glimpse of a much larger picture of the classroom environment, of which social environment is only a small part.

Based on the duplication and/or relation of the contents of the categories and by extension the synopses, I clustered them into three larger groups. The contents of these larger

groups, when combined, provided the emergent themes.

The first theme, ***Impact of the Social Climate on Students*** is derived from a combination of synopses ten and twelve. It purports that, the social climate in a university classroom is important to the adult students for the effect it has on classroom process as well as its influence on what is discussed and hence what students learn.

According to the data, students find that the social climate of the university classroom is a very important, aspect of their learning experience. A positive social climate affects the learning process by engendering feelings of comfort and relaxation, thereby providing for the free exchange of ideas. It also dictates whether or not students open up and discuss personal experiences and how they handle certain problems so that others may learn from their experiences.

The second theme, ***Influence of the Instructor***, is drawn from synopses one, three, eight and eleven. The instructor has a significant influence on university classroom social structure and processes and by extension on the climate in the classroom.

Students perceive that the instructor "sets the tone" of the social climate of the university classroom. The instructor not only sets the tone of the teacher-student interaction but also has a tremendous influence on the student-student interaction. He or she may create

opportunities for student-student interaction through classroom teaching methods as well as assignments sets for personal time. The instructor may or may not choose to facilitate efforts at interaction within the classroom.

The third theme, The ***Culture of Student-Student Interaction*** is derived from synopses two, four, five, six, seven and nine. Student-student interaction, a key component of the classroom social climate, is dependent on a number of variables such as individual personalities, social expectations, registration status, that is, full-time or part-time; level of familiarity developed with other students and the professor's facilitation of all these variables.

The process of deriving themes from the data is essentially one of grouping the highlights of the sum total of all six interviews. The three themes which have emerged from the data (1) Impact of the Social Climate on Students (2) Influence of the Instructor and (3) The Culture of Student-Student Interaction represent the essence of the study because they (a) answer the main research question and the sub-questions, and (b) point to the implications for instructors/educators of adults in light of students' needs and students' perceptions of instructors.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter begins with a discussion of findings from the study. The research question and sub-questions are then revisited and considered in light of the findings and against the background of the literature review. Finally, my personal reflections on the research process and the results are presented.

Discussion of Themes

The social climate in this university classroom generally existed outside the consciousness of the students during the time they attended the class. Nevertheless, faced with the opportunity to openly reflect on their social experience, all the participants readily agreed that there had been a social aspect to their classroom experience and furthermore, that it had been a significant part of that experience.

Kelley, the wife and mother of two with two jobs outside the home initially described her life as being full, and made the point that she doesn't go to a class for social interaction. However, by the end of the interview, upon reflecting on her time in the classroom under study, she said that she had benefited from the social interaction. Her response is typical of the other respondents, in that they were initially unaware of the social atmosphere and then

amazed at how much it had affected them. She states:

> I don't usually have social expectations when I sign up in a class. It has been a by-product I didn't think of when I was signing up...It certainly enhances what I do, there's no doubt about that.

It is significant that the participants were chiefly instructors in adult education and were enrolled in a course on adult education. This supports my original contention that students and instructors interact socially all the time but are not usually aware of what they are doing, how their actions impact on others in the classroom setting and how they are influenced by others. Consequently both instructors and students may not be able to name their actions consciously and to reflect upon them with a view to developing a theory of practice.

Theme Number A

The importance and relevance of the social climate in university classrooms.

In general, the students in this study think that the social climate is very important, but is not the most important aspect of the classroom experience. They perceive benefits from classroom interaction to be greater exposure

through others' experiences, a broader perspective on life and the opportunity to exchange feelings and ideas. The following extracts from the interviews will illustrate this theme.

Lois has a winning and friendly personality, a ready smile and was quick with her responses, never appearing to think about them very much. She appeared 'caught up' in the topic as if it spoke to her personally.

> The social climate as an adult is important, has been more significantly important than at any other time when I have been going to school. I mean, you gain a lot from your instructor, you can gain a lot from your experiences and from the experiences the other adults in the class have to offer and all this helps you to grow a little further in your own thoughts and actions.

Lois is very strong on the point of her personal need for a good social climate and being able to benefit from hearing about other people's experiences.

> I think the social atmosphere is important. I think it is important to feel relaxed, feel comfortable and that way you can glean more information. I find myself slower (academically) as an adult student so I need all the perks I can possibly get. I need to feel comfortable, to get to know the other students and the

> instructor. Lately I've been at home raising kids, not out in the general world quite so much, so it helped to open some ideas up for me. I had my own specific goals going in there and well, they changed throughout the class as well.

Betty also sees the need for a positive classroom social atmosphere. She has a strong personality, correspondingly strong views on social issues and tended to give long answers to questions, with emphasis on every other word, as she pressed home her point.

> I think that it's very important. I know that sometimes it cannot be the be-all and end-all, but because we ***are*** social beings and no one likes to be totally isolated, this is an opportunity to exchange feelings, You know, when we read material and generate ideas, we can get further by ***talking*** about what we think and ***asking*** others how they feel. It is beneficial to express ideas freely and openly, so that they can be scrutinized by everyone.

Shelly, who describes herself as gregarious, was relatively reserved during the interview. She spoke slowly, thoughtfully and quietly, but I could sense that she was giving deep thought to her responses. She sees a difference in the need for social interaction between students who have

been out of the academic area for sometime and those who had been in a continuous program of higher education. Shelly also thinks that some people like the interaction just for interaction per se. She finds that:

> For those who have been away and come back to school, a congenial, social atmosphere is more conducive to being at ease and once you are at ease, you perform better, that's what I think...But I have met some people who came just because they love learning and they love the academic social atmosphere and so, to them it was the whole gamut of social and academic together, just for the joy of socializing in an academic setting.

One common observation from the students is that, among students, the social climate has varying degrees of importance, for different reasons. Mae and Renee, themselves teachers of adults, describe themselves as introverts and said that the social climate is more important to extroverts, than it is to them. Mae claims,

> I'm an introvert so I don't see that as affecting me a whole lot, but I really see that it might affect somebody else, if they were an extrovert and needed that.

Renee understands that although class assignments with group work often suited extroverts better, as an introvert she needed to participate also.

> I think it is beneficial for a lot of people. For myself, I tend to listen rather than talk, but I still get a lot out of it, but if I didn't have it I could still do what I have to do. But like I said, there are group projects which you have to do with other students, so you need to interact, at least, you have to interact with that group.

Mae feels that she too could participate meaningfully in a classroom if a group project had been assigned and she had to contribute. She says,

> I think for me, I get encouragement from the teacher because I tend to be a natural introvert, therefore it's a lot more difficult for me to go up and just start chattering, but if I have a project which the teacher has assigned, I can take a group of people and natter away.

The foregoing illustrates the value of group work in promoting interaction among students in the university classroom. Apart from the academic value, classroom collaboration sets the students to talk and to interact and integrates introverts and others who might not be included in main stream groups normally.

Betty, for all her strength of personality admits to being affected by the social climate and sees the instructor as somewhat responsible for making sure that the social interaction is positive. She says,

> I know it (social climate) affects me a lot and I wrote that in my journal. It's important for me that I have a good rapport on the whole with the professor. If the professor isn't accepting or encouraging, it can really undermine a person's intentions of learning or enjoyment of the class. So usually the more social interaction, the more comfortable you feel. I also believe that the social climate affects the ability to retain and recall material learned.

Theme Number B

The instructor has a significant influence on university classroom social structure and processes and by extension, on the climate in the classroom.

The students perceive that the social atmosphere of the classroom is shaped by the teacher-student and the student-student relations as well as the instructor's personal and professional characteristics. Some of the processes which are viewed as affecting the social climate are the instructional method and management of the curriculum and the level of comfort and ease the students gain over time. Other

factors seen as affecting the classroom social climate are the physical comfort of the classroom and the size of the class.

It was particularly interesting to note that the students see the instructor as controlling the teacher-student relationship as well as largely controlling the student-student relationship. On the subject of factors influencing the relationship among students in the classroom, Renee sees the instructor's open encouragement of student-student interaction as a plus. She contends that,

> The teacher sets the comfort level when he or she gives the opportunity to share ideas, even if they are different...at the beginning the instructor said, "Grades are important , but I want you all to get something out of it. I want you all to talk to members of your groups." We were encouraged to speak to fellow students and to get together...in addition, the teacher's facilitation of group discussion helped us to get to know each other.

Mae, who describes herself as an introvert, but exhibited a very forthright and open personality, had tremendously long responses to those questions which particularly interested her. She sees the instructor as being key to the classroom social atmosphere. Mae says,

> It depends if the teacher's style is a lecture style. I see the teacher as the facilitator, so if the teacher just lectures to that class with no participation from the floor, then students will just go in and out, with no social interaction.

Shelly also placed the responsibility for the teacher-student interaction squarely with the instructor. In her opinion:

The teacher sets the tone because he or she can choose to act friendly and treat the students with respect or the teacher can take the position of an authority figure and just think about him/herself. As I said, the teacher sets the tone.

Kelley, who felt that she did not need the social interaction because of her busy lifestyle, thought that the teacher-student relationship is important and that in this class it went well. She described the instructor's professional character and style.

> It was very good (teacher-student) interaction, I felt. There was definitely room for us to express our opinion and they were taken and used as good examples or used as part of what we were trying to learn. The Prof. was very open and encouraged that feeling of trust and

> mutual respect. The Prof. also genuinely believed and demonstrated that (the Prof.) too would learn throughout the course, that it wasn't just one point of view that we were there to learn, but that (he/she) would learn too. And that was good. It was re-reinforcing a good atmosphere.

In continuing the theme of structure and processes influencing the social climate in the classroom, the instructor's organization and management of the curriculum is seen as important because it affects the level of pressure or comfort the students feel. These in turn influence the students' confidence level and desire to communicate. In general, the students interviewed thought that the instructor fostered social interaction by assigning a lot of group work both inside and outside of the classroom.

Some interviewees said that there were other students in the class who felt that the instructor wasn't structured enough nor firm enough. Underneath the responses there is that previously mentioned thread of the instructor bearing the ***burden*** of the responsibility for the classroom social atmosphere. Betty spoke in her usual forthright manner:

> There was a lot of material covered, some of it quite controversial and a lot of room to discuss the ideas. So when we were given the opportunity to discuss something, it usually brought about a lively discussion.

> The classes were well managed, from my point of view. Perhaps it's a matter of exposure, if you've been exposed to people who are even less organized and harder to follow, you know what to do. A less formal structure is more demanding and frustrating, but I understood what the instructor wanted, so I didn't feel frustrated. It was a good class for me.

Mae also felt that the instructor's method of teaching encouraged socializing but that some students found it discouraging.

She describes it thus:

> What the instructor did was set a group project, kick us out, tell us to go work on it and then walk around from group to group. And often this would go right into a break, so we had the option of going wherever we wanted.
>
> Some students found that the instructor wasn't firm enough, but for me it wasn't the case, but for some of the people that complained , the discouragement for them was that the instructor wasn't rigid enough, wasn't firm enough. I had no problem with it because that was just personal style.

Kelley also feels that the instructor's organization and management of the curriculum fostered social interaction

> I think that it encouraged the interaction, because

there was obviously some structure, yet, there was fluidity within the structure, so that if there were points you wanted to cover or discuss, related to the topics listed for that week, we could. It wasn't a rigid program, it allowed for insight of course, if that was what the class seemed to be aiming at or what the class needed. So, for me that would encourage social interaction because although there was some structure, it was a flexible, fluid structure and you still learned from it at the end.

On the other hand, when asked about features which might discourage social interaction among adult students, Kelley lays that responsibility firmly with the teacher, although elsewhere she says that her personal lifestyle meant that she did not necessarily need social interaction in the classroom. She tells, what in her mind, would discourage positive social climate in the classroom.

Feeling that what they say might be judged as wrong and not being encouraged to speak about their experiences, because the facts are that we have some more experiences than children and that we may wish to talk about those amongst other people in the class. Our age and our experience are factors for opportunities.

Renee, a teacher of adults, who describes herself as an

introvert finds that the quieter students in this class were not encouraged to participate. She finds that allocating marks for class participation helps the interaction.:

> The instructor didn't encourage participation from the students who were quiet. I am comparing this professor with my professor last year who said that if you didn't participate it would affect your marks.

Theme Number C

The culture of student-student interaction

One aspect of the student-student interaction in the university classroom has already been identified by the students as the instructor's control or lack thereof, over classroom discussion and the effects of his or her personal encouragement of interaction, or lack of encouragement.

Student-student interaction is seen as a vital part of the classroom social atmosphere and students perceive it to be very important to their learning experience. Interaction is seen as being more important to full-time students as opposed to part-time students, more important to younger students as opposed to older students, and as discussed previously, more important to extroverts than to introverts. They further cited individual lifestyles and personalities, level of familiarity developed with other students and the

professor's facilitation of all of the above, as being variables influencing the interaction among them.

Renee, like Kelley, has a busy lifestyle and attends school part-time. She is married, with children and has a full-time job. She appreciates the influence that the social climate has on the adult learner but says that there just isn't time for her to get to know other students well. She states:

Being busy with your own life, not having time for yourself and time to develop friendships is a real drawback. It depends upon whether or not you are a full-time student. Like myself, if you just go for one class, you usually just have to leave, even if you wanted to interact, there just isn't the time.

Lois on the other hand feels that having attended this university previously helped her to set realistic social expectations. So now, years later, knowing her surroundings and knowing herself better, helped her to attain a certain level of self confidence.

> When I did my first degree, going from a high school setting to a university setting, you kind of experience alienation, because you go from a small place where you sort of know everybody. You kind of get swallowed up when you go to such a big place Coming back to

> university, this time, I knew where all the buildings were and that sort of thing. Also I knew what I was going to try and accomplish, probably a little more confident, a little more focused.

Betty, the youngest interviewee, is married and without children. She attended university full-time and was in the final semester of the diploma program, consequently she had attended several classes with the same students.. Betty feel that the friendship among some students was a result of meeting in successive classes. She speaks in her usual forthright manner,

> I don't know if I had any social expectations right at the very beginning, but now that I'm ending one program and starting a new one, I do. You know that it's the same group of people that you are going to see over and over and you can get to be quite close. So we ***do*** get together and we ***do*** chat and we ***do*** have fun and some people even arrange to meet each other outside of school, which shows that the class has grown closer together. But I think that depends on the frequency of seeing people and whether or not the classes are big.

Not all aspects of the student-student interaction in a university classroom are seen as positive. Some students see differences in age and in world views as a major source

of dissension in classroom interaction. Younger adults are seen as mainly full-time students, more competitive, with less responsibility and wanting more structured classes. Mae says that she experienced culture shock mixing with younger students,

> I graduated in a college setting about ten years ago, so now I'm returning, this is probably my fourth class and we are talking major culture shock here. This one you visited has been my best class to date...More than half the people in my classes have been younger than me. I've found that I can relate better to someone my own age. I mean the younger kids are sayings things like, 'Why would you wanna occupy a seat at the university.?' So I'm thinking 'this is something my son would say'...Another thing which alienated me from some people in other classes was just our perspectives, and again that had to do with our age differences.

Research Question Revisited

This study sought to examine the relations and behavior in the classroom, as seen from the students' point of view. Specifically, the question is, How is the influence of the social climate perceived by adult students in a university classroom?

All of the participants, upon reflection, said that the

social climate of the classroom had influenced and/or benefited them, from Betty, who enjoyed it for the sheer joy of meeting new people and exchanging views, to Lois, whose life goals were changed as a result of classroom interaction. They suggested that students' social needs are largely individualistic and therefore some students' needs might be similar and others different.

It became apparent from the responses that the individual social perspective helps to determine how the influence of the classroom social climate is perceived., The participants implied however, that the influence of the social environment is reflected in the end product that they take away from the class, that is, whether they learned well or not. They all said that they had a positive experience in this classroom.

The sub-questions represent component parts of the main research question and therefore are discussed first. The answers to the sub-questions combine to answer the overall question.

Sub-question 1

What are the components of the adult university classroom social environment?

The interviewees identified several factors as contributing to the classroom social environment. Chief

among these are the opportunities available for student-student communication, the teacher's influence and the individual personalities. Whatever the individual student's desire for interaction, if the opportunities are not available, then interaction is unlikely to take place and at best is sporadic, superficial and not very meaningful.

Opportunities for communication within the classroom arise from group work, classroom discussion, brainstorming and panel discussions. Outside the classroom, interaction takes place when students have flexible schedules, collaborate on assignments and actively pursue that interaction.

The teacher's influence is seen as a significant component of the classroom climate. The students perceive that the instructor sets the tone for classroom climate firstly by the kind of relationship he or she establishes with the students and secondly, by his or her facilitation of student-student interaction. This facilitation can be accomplished largely through strategies in organizing classroom learning activities and home assignments.

Individual personality characteristics constitute the third significant component of the university classroom social climate. The students perceive that personality labels such as *introvert* or *extrovert* dictates the individual desire for interaction and the degree to which that interaction is achieved. The individual comfort level and ease are functions of personality and they in turn determine

participation in classroom activities.

Sub-question 2

Do students in a university classroom perceive that social factors affect their learning ?

Yes, the university students interviewed are of the opinion that social factors definitely affect their learning. Ironically, previous to being interviewed, they had not consciously considered the social atmosphere of their classroom as impacting on them, or even as being an existing entity. They definitely had no social expectation when they registered for their program of study but came to expect after a time. While all the participants were in the same class, their experiences as students and even their perception of shared experiences, differed, based on the other factors at work in their lives.

The students generally feel that a congenial social atmosphere helps them to feel relaxed, resulting in better academic performance. The chief social factor perceived as affecting their learning is the instructor's personal encouragement. All participants saw the encouragement of the instructor as a key factor in the learning process and the following is a collection of phrases used to describe the instructor of the class under study: interested in the students, interested in their well being, listened well, open and friendly, allowed everyone the opportunity to speak his

or her mind, was honest, wasn't judgmental, allowed for creativity and differences, spoke of personal experiences, did not encourage quieter students, wasn't structured enough, changed things last minute and drove everyone nuts.

It is clear that students place a large part of the responsibility for their learning with the instructor. This speaks directly to Cranton's (1992) statement that:

> One of the few places where we can expect adult educators to have a background in adult education is where they are *teaching* adult education itself. It is natural enough then, for educators, especially those beginning in their profession to assume the expert role. In this role, the adult educator transmits information about the subject to an "audience" and answers questions they might have. The main characteristic of the expert role is the perception of oneself as having information or skills which are passed on to others. Attitudes and values are often incidental to this role. (p.69)

Additional social factors identified by the participants as impacting on their learning are, (a) the exposure to other people's experiences and especially how they handled difficult situations, (b) individual personalities, (c) registration status, that is full-time or part-time, (d) level of familiarity among students, (e) differences in age and in philosophy and (f) the instructor's facilitation of student-student interaction.

Sub-question 3

How important do students in a university classroom consider the classroom social climate to be?

The students consider the social climate in the university classroom to be an important factor in the learning equation, but not the most important. The social atmosphere is seen to encourage or discourage the free and open exchange of ideas, promote or deter the talking through of problems and generally influence the students' feelings of comfort and ease. Some students perceive that personal comfort affects the student's ability for retention and recall, thereby impacting on academic performance.

The social atmosphere is seen as more important to some students than others, for example, introverts are seen as being less influenced by the social climate, relative to the extroverted students. It is felt that the younger adults with less responsibilities need, and participate in, social activities more than students who work and take care of a family as well as attend school. Students see other benefits of a positive social climate as being greater exposure through others' experiences, a broader perspective and an acquired tolerance for differences and the opportunity to exchange feelings and have their own ideas scrutinized.

Individually, the influence of the social climate ranged from a five out of ten rating in the case of Kelley who has a very full life, to a seven out of ten rating in the cases of

Renee and Mae, both introverts. Given the interviewees' appreciation of other students' needs and perspectives, it was difficult to know if, when asked to rate the importance of the social climate in the classroom on a scale of 1-10, they used their needs or the perceived needs of other students. Mae, the introvert was the exception to this case as she said, "for myself, I'd give it a five, just for comfort level, generally, I'd give it a seven, because some people really do need it."

Implications for Instructors

A classroom represents a microcosm of the larger society, with disparate personalities, diverse views and divergent needs. Therefore, a common experience such as attending a class, does not necessarily result in uniformity of interpretation by the students. Against this background, any consensus in the reflections of the students must be accepted as a reasonable and acceptable interpretation of that experience.

Bearing in mind the individuality of the participants, there was a general sameness in their reflections although there was one participant who had her worldview altered as a result of her interaction in this class. This sameness of the respondents' thoughts is reflected in the repetition of the meaning units which make up the categories.

Emerging from the data also is a picture of the

classroom as a whole entity because several of the quotes encompass more than the specific feature of the classroom under discussion. Several quotes can be fitted into any of the discussions of the themes, simply because the experience in the classroom is a blending of the academic, the social and the personal and it is difficult to discuss one area without crossing over into the other.

The first implication for adult educators is that they need to recognize those instances when the academic, the social and the personal are naturally intertwined and present and promote student-student interaction in the classroom as a part of the learning process. The importance of this endeavor by the instructors is underscored in Theme One which states that the social climate in a university classroom is important to the students for the effect it has on classroom process as well as its influence on what is discussed and hence what students learn.

Cranton (1992) says that using experience as a ***way*** of learning (beginning with Dewey) and using experience as a ***resource*** for learning (Knowles) are two fundamental concepts in adult education. It is difficult to separate social interaction and academic interaction because students are always recounting personal experiences as part of the learning process. Kelley, despite the fact that she does not go to class for social interaction admits, "it's sort of a characteristic of adults , it's custom, the way we handle problems, talking things through." She is supported by

Lindeman (1961) who says:

> Most of us, if we are intent upon making experience yield its intellectual content, need to ***discuss*** situations with those who are concerned with us, with those who are likely to be influenced and with those who have special information which is relevant to our needs. (p. 117)

The data suggest that a positive social climate enhances the university classroom and the students say that they benefit from it, whether they recognize it immediately, or not. Some adult students are particularly sensitive to the social milieu because of the life experiences they have had. On the other hand there are students who lead such busy lives that they do not have time for the social interaction. However, when it happens as ***a part*** of the learning process they welcome it as a bonus.

According to the students, the instructor influences the classroom climate through his/her control of classroom social structure and processes (Theme Two). Implicit in this perception of control is a responsibility on the part of the instructor to create and implement instructional strategies which create a comfortable classroom environment conducive to interaction/collaboration among the students.

The second implication for adult educators therefore, is that they have a responsibility to be aware of the social character of the classroom and to do whatever they can to

make it a positive and productive atmosphere. It is clear from this study that there are instructors who strive to make the university classroom a comfortable venue for adults to share experiences and grow, within an organized program.

Since the cardinal goal of adult education is to help learners learn what they want to learn, and at the same time acquire more developmentally advanced meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991) then instructors need to assess the learning needs of their students and, as a part of professional practice, strive to improve the social environment, wherever this is needed.

The third implication for adult educators is that, if they are to assist these adult students to grow as self-directed learners, then the educator has to progressively decrease the learners' dependency on him/herself (Mezirow 1991). As noted in Theme Two, a significant number of adult students depend on the instructor to create the atmosphere for social interaction, not only between the instructor and the students, but also to set the tone for and facilitate student-student interaction. However, part of the growth of adult learners is acquiring self-reliance and depending less on the instructor for defining the classroom atmosphere.

According to the data, while the instructor has a significant influence on the classroom social atmosphere, student-student interaction is also a key component. Theme Three, states that the culture of student-student interaction depends on other variables, such as individual personalities,

and social expectations and time available for socializing. It is prudent to remember that this mixing of the academic and the social does not find favor with all adult students and that some (younger) adults who have been in a continuous program of study may learn better within a rigid and structured framework. There are varying degrees of social needs across the spectrum of adult learners and the university class of adult students studying adult education is not exempt from the influence of the classroom social climate.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

TOPIC: How is the influence of the social climate in a university classroom perceived by the adult student?

STUDENT-STUDENT INTERACTION

(1) What do you understand by the term University Classroom Social Environment (UCSE)?

(2) What factors discouraged social interaction among the students?

(3) What factors encouraged social interaction among the students ?

TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION

(4) Tell me about the teacher-student interaction in your classroom.

(5) What factors influenced the teacher-student interaction?

(6) Are there different aspects of the teacher-student relationship in an adult classroom environment, relative to a high school environment, for examaple?

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF WHAT FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO THE UCSE

(7) Compare the classroom social atmosphere during your teen years with that of your adult years. What do you think accounts for: (a) the differences (b) the similarities?

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF INSTRUCTOR'S BEHAVIOR

(8) What characteristics did your instructor exhibit, through behavior, which, in your opinion:

(a) promoted social interaction among the students?

(b) discouraged social interaction among the students?

(9) How did the instructor's organization and management of the curriculum encourage or discourage social relations in the classroom and outside of the classroom?

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UCSE WHICH DETER/PROMOTE LEARNING

(10) To what extent do you think the social climate of the classroom affects an adult student?

TO BE CLASSIFIED

(11) Do you have social expectations when you register in a class?

(b) If no, why not? If yes, what are they?

(12) Describe the social atmosphere of this class on your first day.

(13) Has the social atmosphere changed since the first day and if so, how?

(14) Has this class experience been competitive learning or collaborative learning?

(14b) How did this affect the social interaction?

(15) Outside of the academic, did this class experience present scope for individual growth in any other area(s)?

(16) How important do you think social interaction is in the University Classroom Social Environment?

APPENDIX B

November 28,1994

Dear Fellow Student,

I am a Master's student in the Department of Educational Policy Studies and I am presently doing research approved by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. Your instructor has agreed that members of this class might be interested in volunteering as participants in the study.

The purpose of my research is to seek insight into and understanding of the social dynamics operating within the university classroom. Many researchers have examined climate setting (by the instructor) as a means of enhancing the classroom environment, thereby promoting learning. These studies led me wonder about the university students' contribution to climate setting and whether their social behavior in the classroom affects other students' performance.

This study will involve in-depth interviews with students from this class and I am inviting you to be one of the informants. I will be collecting data on student-student interaction, teacher-student interaction, students' perceptions about classroom social climate and how it affects the individual, among other topics. The interview is expected to last about an hour, and with the interviewee's consent, will be tape-recorded.

If you would be willing to share some of your personal thoughts and feelings about your learning experiences viz-a-viz social relations, please indicate below and return this form to your instructor at your next class.

Please be assured that all information will be treated confidentially. Participation is completely voluntary and

you may drop out of the project at any time.

I will be happy to present you with a copy of the findings of the study upon its completion.

Sincerely,

Vinton Rose Spencer

No, I am not interested _____

Yes, I am interested _____

If yes, please provide name _____

Telephone Number _____

What is the best time of day to call you? _____

What is the earliest date in December or January that you will be available for an interview?_____